

JUDAISM: THE 'NO EXCUSES' POLICY

Category: Devarim, Nitzavim

What does this week's parsha say about the different excuses you might proffer?

Excuses

We all know what excuses are, and we've all had an opportunity to give and be given a couple of excuses. In politics, every time something fails, there immediately is an endless stream of excuses and no one ever actually claims responsibility for failure.

I've also had my fair share of excuse trading. I remember as a youngster going out to malls and office buildings, asking people to put on tefillin. When you're in this line of work you get to hear an incredible array of very creative excuses and arguments. One famous argument is, "If there is a G-d where was He during the Holocaust?"

The Rebbe once wrote a response to this argument saying that the six million people who died in the Holocaust are too holy to be used as an excuse not to do a mitzvah, and we should never blame those holy martyrs for our own laziness.

Parshas Netzavim also deals with the human tendency to make excuses. Any person is liable to complain that the Torah is too obscure for him and the mitzvahs are written in such lofty terms that he cannot understand them.

The Torah anticipated this excuse and Moses tell the Jewish people, "*Lo nifleis hi*, The Mitzvahs are not concealed from you." Every part of Torah has been explained and re-explained over the generations and today most of these explanations can be found in almost every language. "*Velo rechokah hi*," Moses says, "Nor are they far from you." This is especially true today, in the information age, with the advent of the internet. There is no place in the world where you can't get access to the entire Torah.

The verse continues, *“lo bashamayim hi*, The mitzvahs are not up in heaven”; there are people that argue that the Torah is too spiritual and that it’s impractical, and the mitzvahs are ‘up in the sky.’ When people say about someone that he’s up in the sky, they mean that he’s missing realism or he’s not down to earth, so the Torah and Mitzvahs are also too ‘out there’ for regular people and we need to modernize the rules a little, to round off the corners of the Torah’s statutes in order to make them more appropriate for our generation.

And finally, Moses says, *“velo me’ever layam hi*, nor is the Torah beyond the sea.” There is an excuse that people in Israel like to use. They claim that the very fact that they live in Israel is enough for them and they don’t see the need for mitzvahs. Because in Israel where everybody’s Jewish, everybody speaks Hebrew and everybody goes to the army, there’s no threat of assimilation. It’s only ‘overseas,’ in other countries, where there is the threat that Jews need mitzvahs to stay connected with their Judaism.

American Jews also use this excuse — only the other way around. They say, “In Israel, where everybody’s Jewish and speaks Hebrew, where all the schools and shops are closed on Shabbat and the whole atmosphere is very Jewish, it’s easy for Jews to keep the mitzvahs. But here in America, “a goyishe medina,” it’s too hard to be observant.

“Rather,” the Torah states, *“ki karov eilacha...* It is very close to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can fulfill it.”

There are a few different types of mitzvahs. There are mitzvahs that have to be done ‘in your heart’ like loving and fearing G-d. There are mitzvahs that are ‘in your mouth’ like praying and studying Torah; which you can’t just do with your eyes, you need to speak the words with your mouth. (Also, everything that goes into or leaves your mouth falls under this category, such as eating kosher foods or only using clean language and never slandering another person). Then, there are mitzvahs that have to be ‘fulfilled’ with your hands like putting on tefillin and lighting Shabbat candles.

Moses is informing us that every Jew has a Jewish soul that gives him the desire and the ability to connect with Judaism with every fiber of his being. When we tune ourselves into the soul’s desires to be Jewish, then every mitzvah is within our capacity — whether we are rich or poor, righteous or not, no matter what a

person's situation might be.

Examples

The Talmud states, "When the poor man, the rich man and the wicked man come before the heavenly judge, the poor man will be asked, 'Why did you not study Torah?' If he answers, 'I was poor and all my time was occupied with supporting my family,' he will be challenged, 'were you poorer than Hillel?'"

"There is a story told about Hillel that he would work very hard to earn one coin each day and he would give half of the coin to the guard at the gate of the study hall and use the other half to support his family. It happened one Friday that he was unable to earn the one coin and the guard of the study hall would not let him in. He climbed onto the roof and sat with his ear to the chimney to be able to hear the words of Torah from the great sages Shmaya and Avtalyon. It was in the wintry month of Teves and snow began to fall upon him, but he remained oblivious to the cold for he loved Torah so.

"The following morning was Shabbos and when the dawn broke Shmaya said to Avtalyon, "Every morning the study hall lights up but today it is dark, perhaps the day is cloudy." They raised their eyes and saw the figure of a man in the chimney. They ascended and found Hillel buried under three amos (aprox. 4½ ft.) of snow. They carried him inside and revived him and set him down by the fire, and they said, 'It is worth desecrating the Shabbat for such a man.'

"The rich man will be asked, 'Why did you not study Torah?' If he answers, 'I was wealthy and my time was occupied with protecting my assets,' he will be challenged, 'Were you wealthier than Rabbi Elazar?' They said about Rabbi Elazar ben Charsum that his father left him a thousand cities on land and a thousand merchant vessels at sea, yet every day he would take a little food on his shoulder and go from city to city and from country to country to study Torah.

"Then the wicked man will be asked, 'Why did you not study Torah?' If he answers, 'I was handsome and my time was occupied by my evil urge (Yetzer Horah),' he will be challenged: 'Were you more handsome than Josef?'"

Every day Potifar's wife would entice Josef in any way she could. She would change her clothes many times during the day to attract him to her. She would

beg him, "Just hear me out" — but he never would. She threatened him, "I'll have you thrown in prison," and he would simply answer, "G-d frees the captives." She even offered him a thousand bars of silver if he would agree to be with her. Yet he never did." (ע"כ לשון הגמרא)

From this Gemara it is clear that Judaism does not believe in excuses. The Torah expects every Jew to take responsibility for his actions and to do that which is expected of him.